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The Sheffield Shock

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HMS Sheffield was a modern ship of superior design. An attack by a single aircraft and a hit by a single missile ended the ship's life. It is very natural to ask what lessons this teaches us about the future of naval warfare: especially the future of surface ships in navies.

There is nothing surprising in the Sheffield incident from which to draw new conclusions. All naval planners recognize that missile technology is making ships more vulnerable. The issue is: has the time come to replace the surface ship? Military men typically cling to outmoded weapons systems. Yet when the time comes for them to replace a weapon, it is not just because that weapon has become vulnerable. A better weapon must also be available. Whether it be with cavalry, battleships or surface ships, the problem is to determine when the new weapon has arrived and when the old can be discarded safely.

The replacement for the surface ship is not yet in sight. Why? Because a maritime nation like the United States must transport large quantities of goods and raw materials to and from its shores, and for the foreseeable future that must be done in surface ships. Neither submarines nor aircraft can deliver the volumes required. If we must utilize surface merchant ships, we must be able to protect them. Submarines can help

protect shipping from attacks by surface ships and submarines but they are of little use against an attacking aircraft. Land-based aircraft can help, too, but not in situations like the Falkland Islands where no British base was close enough for land-based aircraft to be able to enforce the blockade in which the Sheffield was engaged.

We maintain military forces primarily to engage in wars overseas, surely not because of concerns with Canada and Mexico. We must, therefore, be able to move forces across oceans. We must also be able to base forces like aircraft carriers and amphibious forces on the seas when shore bases will not be available in a region of conflict. The British requirement to use force in as distant an area as the Falklands is one example, if an extreme one. Our limited capability to project military power into the Persian Gulf region today is another.

Vulnerability: The lesson of the Sheffield is that because there is no substitute yet in sight we cannot dispense with surface ships like aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships and destroyers even though they are vulnerable. What we must do instead is to examine what vulnerability means for how we design and operate such ships. Historically, field commanders have shied away from placing a vulnerable system at risk in situations where it might be defeated. The Battle of Jutland in World War I is one example. Both the British and the German admirals had the bulk of their battleships on the scene. Each foresaw the consequences of losing those ships as severe. As a result they engaged

only halfheartedly and the results were inconclusive. Similarly, the United States refrained from sending even one of its twelve supercarriers into the Persian Gulf during the Iranian crisis of 1979-81.

How can we avoid overcautiousness in war engendered by concern for vulnerability? We can build lots of surface ships and anticipate that there will be losses, or we can try to equip them to defeat the missile threat. Our Navy's response today is to try to reduce vulnerability by building ships that are larger and more rugged. The two supercarriers that are in the President's budget request currently before the Congress, and which cost \$3.4 billion each, are the key examples.

The Sheffield case points out how difficult it is to harden a surface ship so that it can weather missile attacks. The extent of damage to the Sheffield was far greater than one would expect from a single missile. We must surmise that it chanced to strike some vulnerable point that ignited a chain reaction of destruction. If a destroyer has even one such sensitive point, an aircraft carrier has many of them. Many of the vulnerable points on a carrier—aviation fuel lines, bombs and planes loaded with fuel on the flight deck—cannot possibly be hidden behind defensive shielding. We once armored the sides of our battleships, but at Pearl Harbor they were sunk by bombs through the decks, not the sides. We should not follow that battleship folly once again, especially since the new missiles are becoming so accurate that they can be guided to the specific points of greatest vulnerability.

It is also difficult to believe that lots of heavy, sophisticated aircraft on large aircraft carriers will defeat the missile threat. One theory is that only such aircraft can reach out to warn of impending attack and destroy the attacking aircraft, ship or submarine before it launches its missiles. Those are, indeed, necessary functions. Technology is making it possible to perform each of them with systems other than large aircraft: reconnaissance with satellites, land-based AWACS early-warning aircraft and unmanned drones; attack with unmanned missiles, as in the case of the Sheffield. It has long been evident that our Air Force and Navy are not going to com-

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mit pilots in areas where heavy air defenses exist because the loss rates would just be too high.

Another theory is that the large carriers will defeat the missile threat by carrying the fight right to the enemy's bases and bottling up or destroying his fleet. The problem with this strategy is that it ignores the emergence of a highly capable Soviet Navy, which has emphasized missiles for attacking surface ships. The Soviet Navy should at least be credited with an ability to make life very tough for intruders in its backyard. Whatever work we do close to Soviet naval bases will have to be done with submarines or with aircraft carrying long-range missiles, not with surface-ship aircraft carriers. Despite the Navy's talk in this direction, it is hard to think that any admiral would seriously recommend exposing our carrier forces only a few hundred miles from the seats of Soviet sea power.

If building surface ships rugged enough to absorb missile hits, or powerful enough to diminish the missile threat substantially, is bucking the trends of technology, the other possible solution is to build more, less expensive ships and anticipate some losses. This may sound defeatist, but it is not. When a navy has \$3.4 billion invested in one ship, two results will follow. First, there will be caution in committing such ships in risky situations. Second, when they are committed, the amount of effort employed in just protecting them is bound to detract from their basic mission. An ability to face the possibility of loss is important to freeing up a field commander's initiative.

Besides, there is good reason to believe that lots of small aircraft carriers can survive just as well as a few supercarriers.

Dispersing our sea-based air power as widely as possible prevents a crippled carrier from tying up too many aircraft and makes it more likely that a carrier will be where it is needed. Added numbers of ships aid defense against missiles because there will be more layers of advanced warning, more ships to confuse an enemy's targeting and more opportunities to decoy his missiles.

Unfortunately, some naval thinkers are distorting the example of the Sheffield into an argument for more large carriers. That would lead to a smaller number of ships in our Navy. They are contending that if the British had only had a large carrier on the scene instead of a small one, the Sheffield might have been protected. This might well be true, but it is specious to draw the conclusion that we should therefore build more supercarriers.

The supercarriers the President is requesting will not be ready to go to sea and do battle for about a decade. They may well be part of our fleet out into the 2020s. How can we measure the value of what might be available to us in such a distant future by what it might have been able to do in the South Atlantic last Tuesday? Surely responsible officials owe it to the American taxpayer to judge how well large carriers are likely to meet the nation's needs over the course of their lifetimes.

Weapons Evolution: The whole history of warfare is littered with cases of military planners preparing for yesterday's battles. What is seldom noticed is how a popular weapon steadily evolves from a simple one to such a complex one that it is found wanting when tested in actual warfare. In the case of the aircraft carrier, it is difficult for us to appreciate that it has been in evolution for over 50 years now. Many of us spent

our whole Navy careers in a new Navy that was born Dec. 7, 1941, when the carrier superseded the battleship as the heart of our naval power. It is not easy to break with such thinking and tradition.

It would be a shame if the human tragedy of the Sheffield falsely led us to perpetuate a dying form of naval warfare. If it did, we might face a future national tragedy of being unprepared. Let us hope that historians look back one day and say that one of the consequences of the sinking of the Sheffield was to focus thought on the growing vulnerability of surface ships; on the idea that future surface ships must not just be larger and more complex versions of today's, but ships that take advantage of new technologies; and on dispersing our Navy, and especially its air power, into more numerous, smaller platforms. If the loss of the Sheffield does help point us toward such a naval strategy for the 21st century its sinking will not have been in vain.

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